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published in

Advances in Life Course Research
2019

DOI (link to publisher)

[10.1016/j.alcr.2019.04.006](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2019.04.006)

[Link to publication in VU Research Portal](#)

citation for published version (APA)

Liefbroer, A. C. (2019). Methodological diversity in life course research: Blessing or curse? *Advances in Life Course Research*, 41, 1-3. [100276]. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2019.04.006>

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Methodological Diversity in Life-Course Research: Blessing or Curse?

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Preprint of a paper that appeared as Aart C. Liefbroer (2019) Methodological diversity in life course research: Blessing or curse? Advances in Life Course Research, Volume 41, 2019, 100276, ISSN 1040-2608, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.alcr.2019.04.006>.

When reading the four contributions on methods of life-course analysis in this special issue, I could not help but think about Weber's (1972 [orig., 1922], p. 1) definition of sociology, which suggests that the goal of sociology (and of life-course analysis, for that matter) is to understand and explain social behavior:

Soziologie (...) soll heißen: eine Wissenschaft, welche soziales Handeln deutend verstehen und dadurch in seinem Ablauf und seinen Wirkungen ursächlich erklären will (Sociology...is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action and thereby with a causal explanation of its course and consequences [English translation from Weber, 1978, p.4]).

The current set of contributions on methods of life-course research seems to me to provide a fruitful mix of methods that allow us to work in the spirit of Weber's suggestion.

However, it was a bit of an unpleasant surprise to find that what Weber formulated was not exactly as I remembered it or wished it to be. My memory was that Weber more or less put an equal emphasis on causal explanation and interpretative understanding, but he actually suggests that interpretative understanding is key to any explanation of social action. Still, I think his definition is illuminating for our understanding of the life course because it suggests that we have to be able to understand the driving forces of social action in order to give credible causal explanations of how they evolve.

In this latter respect, the four contributions on life-course methods to this issue are very interesting, as they show how different methodological approaches are available to the life-course researcher to understand and explain how life courses evolve. Each of them provides the researcher with a specific type of understanding.

Brüderl, Kratz, and Bauer (this issue) discusses how we can use panel data to gain understanding of the life course. To me, this article has a number of strengths that make it important for life-course scholars. It is written in a very transparent way and introduces and discusses growth curve modeling and panel regression in a very elegant and easy-to-grasp manner. It shows how different methods of life-course analysis can be combined within one overarching research

question and produce a dynamic overview of life-course processes. And it offers a nice overview of available (quantitative) methods of life-course research. To start with the latter, Brüderl and his colleagues suggest that four methods are key to understanding the life course, two of them holistic in nature, two of them centered on transitions:

1. Sequence analysis is a holistic, categorical life-course method, useful for classifying series of positions that individuals occupy in their life;
2. Growth curve modeling is a holistic, metric life-course method, useful for classifying developments in metric attributes (like well-being) across life;
3. Event-history regression is a transition-centered method, useful for studying the (causal) determinants of transitions (like marriage or unemployment);
4. Panel regression is a transition-centered method, useful for studying the consequences of transitions.

This is a very useful classification, showing that different methods serve different purposes. Next, Brüderl and colleagues use one panel data set to illustrate how these methods separately and jointly can be used to answer interesting, interlinked research questions. Given that sequence analysis and event-history regression are well-known methods, they concentrate on discussing growth curve modeling and panel regression.

As I mentioned before, the analysis is very informative and well-executed. My only concern about the paper is its lack of attention to qualitative research methods to answer key life course questions. This is particularly noteworthy, given that the authors refer to their approach as ‘triangulation’ in the discussion section. The term ‘triangulation’ is generally used to describe a mixed-method approach in which quantitative and qualitative methods are used to validate concepts (e.g. Webb et al., 1966).

Mund and Nestler (this issue) also present panel models, but focus on a wide diversity of structural equation models that can be used to analyze longitudinal interdependencies between life domains. They start from the well-known cross-lagged panel model (CLPM), discuss its shortcomings and three alternative models that circumvent some or all of the shortcomings of CLPM. The part on the shortcomings of the CLPM is most illuminating. I feel that only few life-course researchers are aware that CLPM rests on a number of assumptions that are hard to satisfy in practice. This is particularly true for the assumption that the scores on independent and dependent variables of all individuals fluctuate around the same group mean. This ignores potential between-person differences in scores on the relevant independent and dependent variables. The three ‘next generation’ models that Mund and Nestler introduce and illustrate with examples allow the three assumptions underlying CLPM to be tested and – if necessary – to be relaxed.

The tools that Mund and Nestler introduce offer interesting extensions of the basic CLPM. At the same time, even though the authors do their utmost to present the models as simple as possible,

the complexity of these models cannot be hid. Interpreting the parameters of the alternative models asks for a level of statistical competence that many scholars – and readers of their articles – do not possess. This points to the problem that some of our models might turn out to be so complex that readers will have a hard time understanding why the model is needed, what the model implies, and how the parameters emanating from the model should be interpreted.

The authors note that, although the models they presented can strongly increase our knowledge, they causal inferences from panel data will never be possible. I agree. But I would add that – in line with Weber’s reasoning – causal inference anyway needs to go hand in hand with interpretative understanding. It is the combination of statistical results and substantive reasoning that is needed to make a convincing contribution to life-course studies.

Piccarreta and Studer (this issue) provide a quite complete overview of methods and issues relating to holistic approaches to analyze the life course. Holistic approaches study the life course in its entirety. Their focus is on studying the life course as a sequence of subsequent positions in one or multiple domains. They present sequence analysis as mainly a descriptive tool. First, they outline challenges to its use as a descriptive tool (like assuring that the clusters formed by sequences are robust). Next, they discuss recent advances. Most of these advances are linked to a programme to integrate description and exploration on the one hand, and inference and explanation on the other. Several approaches (of which some developed by the authors themselves) try to bridge the divide between sequence analysis and event-history analysis. In addition, multi-state models and latent Markov models allow for the description and multivariate analysis of the main pathways in the life course and open another area where more exploratory and more explanatory method meet.

Although this article does not illustrate the methods discussed by an example, it does point to the relevant literature where these new methods are illustrated. It shows that holistic methods have come of age and can be used, if applied creatively, not just to describe and explore life courses, but also to relate them to relevant other processes and attributes, thus contributing to our interpretative understanding of the life course.

Finally, the contribution of Holstein (this issue) is the only one using qualitative methods. Not by coincidence, she starts the article by stating that “life-course research aims to *understand* (my italics) the movement, pathways, and patterns of action of individuals and groups over time within a certain historical time and cultural setting”. In her view, some of the most challenging questions concern individual agency and the interrelationship between objective and subjective aspects. In the article, Holstein introduces the ‘narrative’ interview and the sequential analysis of its content as tools to better understand both objective and subjective aspects of agency. In the first part of the article, the narrative interview and so-called extempore autobiographical narrations are discussed. This, and some related methods for life-course analysis, have been developed in the German setting and the lack of texts in English have resulted in a slow diffusion of these ideas outside German academic circles. Holstein argues convincingly that the

unrestricted ways in which individuals tell their stories lead to better reconstructions of past experiences than many more structured approaches. In the second part of the article, an empirical example is presented about how an individual reconstructs and makes sense of key events in his labor market career. Juxtaposing narratives of different persons in different circumstances allow to grasp the different schemas by which individuals both make sense of what has happened in their lives thus far and try to track their lives into the future.

What is clear from the presentation of this narrative approach is its power to understand ‘life as experienced’ and how it interacts with the actual role positions of individuals and existing structures and scripts. What is less clear from the brief presentation is how it builds upon and contributes to existing theoretical and empirical knowledge that is already available to the life-course researcher. It would be interesting to find out more about how the narrative interview feeds into this cycle of knowledge generation and accumulation. On the one hand, the narrative approach could be placed quite early in this cycle, to generate knowledge on how people interpret their life-course trajectories and provide input for more quantitative data collection procedures that try to ascertain how common specific types of interpretations are among the general population and which people make which types of interpretations. On the other hand, the narrative approach could be placed quite late in this cycle, to examine to what extent ‘objective’ relationships observed in quantitative life-course studies elate to individuals’ own interpretation of these relationships. Finally, quantitative and qualitative approaches could also be used for ‘triangulation’, seeing whether approaching a certain research question or concept by different methods lead to the same conclusion or rather illuminate different facets of the research question or concept.

Taken together, these four contributions show the richness of the methodological approaches that are available to social scientists to understand the life course. At the same time, I doubt whether this ‘richness’ is equally appreciated by all. My impression is that, very often, life-course researchers have a clear preference for one type of approach over the other, and sometimes contest the usefulness or even the legitimacy of ‘competing’ approaches. These tendencies are visible at multiple levels. Within the broad category of quantitative approaches, it is visible when discussing the strengths and weaknesses of more deductive ‘causal’ approaches versus more inductive ‘holistic’ approaches. Within my research group, we have used both types of approaches and it has often led us having to ‘justify’ the use of either of these approaches to reviewers who preferred the other approach. In particular, those in favor of causal analysis are often hard to convince about the usefulness of a more holistic, inductive approach. This tendency to dismiss each other’s approach is even more visible when comparing quantitative and qualitative approaches. One often feels the lack of willingness or even ability to understand one another’s approach and to value the contribution it can make to interpretative understanding. This is all the more unfortunate because understanding the life course includes both understanding ‘lives as lived’ (Buchmann’s [1989] life course as sequence of status/role configurations) and understanding ‘lives as perceived’ (Buchmann’s [1989] individual

representation of the biography). To understand both – and their interplay (as subjective experiences influence the actual choices people make and their choices influence the subjective interpretation of their life trajectory)– we need every type of method that we can muster.

How can this situation be changed? This special issue is a good start, as it not only offers a platform for interdisciplinary life-course research, but also for mixed-methods life-course research, as different types of methods are presented on an equal footing. But it also needs to be ‘institutionalized’ in the sense that the whole range of available methods is presented to our students and represented in our journals. For instance, it would be good to add narrative, biographical methods to our life-course courses and summer school curricula, that are often still very much focused on quantitative methods. It would also be good to organize workshops or design journal issues where life-course scholars use different methods to gain ‘interpretative understanding’ of specific topics in life-course research. Joint papers in which a mixed-method approach is applied would be even better. A journal like *ALCR* could stimulate this by soliciting papers using mixed-method approaches to study the life course. Taken together, these steps could deepen our insight in how life-courses are shaped, understood and reproduced.

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